

Destination HERE: *Tourism in Southwestern Illinois*

Discover Downstate Illinois encompasses 21 counties full of potential ‘everything’

You may not know it, but there is a place in Illinois where you can explore underground caverns and tour a 300-year-old French fortification in the same day. This same region hosts more than 100,000 people for the NASCAR Cup Series weekend at World Wide Technology Raceway and another 30,000 folks for Centralia Balloon Fest a few weeks later. This 21-county region deserves to be promoted and celebrated for all of the wonderful things that folks can experience, and that’s where we come in!

Let us introduce ourselves, we are Discover Downstate Illinois - the state certified tourism bureau that helps communities in our service area market their events, attractions, eateries, and more. You may recognize us by our former name, ILLINOISouth Tourism. While that identity served us well for over a decade, it was time for a refresh. We launched our new brand in early 2023, and if you head to our website downstateil.org, we have a blog that explains the process behind the rebranding efforts.

Our region is such a unique area because it offers everything from metropolitan experiences like going to a Gateway Grizzlies minor league baseball game and rural activities such as visiting a pumpkin patch or Christmas tree farm. As you gear up for travel season, we’d love for you to set aside a couple weekends to Discover Downstate Illinois.

While we could not possibly touch on every single thing to do in our 21 county area in this article, we are happy to run through highlights from our three regions. Our Western Region is comprised of the City of Highland, St. Clair, Monroe, and Randolph Counties. Highland is a foodie’s paradise, and that’s no joke. Schlafly Highland Square serves up amazing food and craft beer, and there are a plethora of options for dessert. Urban Farmhouse and Blue Springs both serve up awesome pie, Patty Cakes has been featured on Food Network’s Cupcake Wars, and The Chocolate Affair specializes in hand-dipped chocolate treats.

In St. Clair County, there are a ton of different attractions to visit. The Gateway Geyser at Malcolm W. Martin Memorial Park is the tallest water fountain in the United States and the third tallest in the world, reaching 630 feet! Vine Street Market at O’Fallon Station is one of the most popular farmers markets in our region and features everything from local produce to wine every Saturday from mid-May through mid-October. Route 15 in Belleville is a major thoroughfare with a few different attractions including the National Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows, The Edge, Eckert’s Family Farms, and The Weingarten. From laser tag to picking peaches, that is a day trip all on its own!

There are outdoor activities galore in Monroe County. Places like Salt Lick Point Land and Water Reserve, Illinois Caverns, Paul Wightman Subterranean Nature Preserve, and more all offer their own hiking difficulty levels and amazing views. Visiting Maeystown is like stepping back in time - with much of its history and architecture still intact, the entire village is on the National Register of Historic Places. Then you have great shopping and dining opportunities in Columbia and Waterloo, including establishments on the Southern Illinois Beer Trail like Stumpy’s Spirits & Distillery, Stubborn German Brewing Company,

and Hopskeller Brewing Company.

More outdoor adventures await in Randolph County, especially for hiking enthusiasts. Piney Creek Ravine is absolutely beautiful and it is home to the largest body of prehistoric rock art in Illinois. Red Bud is a fun day trip because it is home to two different wineries, a brewery, and great eateries. Sparta is best known for being the home to the World Shooting and Recreational Complex, which has the longest trap shooting line in the world – and while you’re in town, White Rooster Farmhouse Brewery in Sparta is always worth a stop. Chester is the hometown of Popeye the Sailor Man creator E.C. Segar,

so you can visit the Spinach Can Collectibles shop for a souvenir and go on a scavenger hunt for Popeye character statues throughout town!

In our Central Region, Bond County could probably be considered the dairy capital of Downstate Illinois. Greenville is home to both Rolling Lawns Farm and Marcoot Jersey Creamery. Both have been honored by the Illinois Office of Tourism for being ‘Illinois Made’ businesses. It’s hard to visit town without leaving with a bag of Marcoot’s cheese curds and a bottle of orange cream milk from Rolling Lawns.

Right off of Interstate 70 sits Vandalia in Fayette County. Many people don’t know that Vandalia was the State Capitol before Springfield! History buffs will love a trip here because the Vandalia Statehouse is the oldest surviving state capitol, and it is where Abraham Lincoln got his start as a State Representative! While in town you can also check out Witness Distillery and try everything from whiskey to rum. Before you leave Vandalia, be sure to look up the Kaskaskia Fire-Breathing Dragon, a fabled roadside attraction in our area.

Many folks have probably heard of the famous Ski soda, and that is made right here in Clinton County! Head to Excel Bottling in Breese to pick up some fresh bottles of Ski and many other varieties of soda. Clinton County is also home to the largest manmade lake in Illinois – Carlyle Lake. From building sandcastles on the beach to sailboats and airboat rides, this 26,000 acre lake plays host to hundreds of thousands of people each year.

In Marion County, Salem is the place to be during the summer months thanks to the Salem Family Aquatic Center. From water slides to a giant bucket that dumps out water – this place is heaven for the kiddos. Centralia is another great stop, as it is home to the Centralia Carillon – one of the 10 largest bell towers in the world. While you’re there, look up Castle Ridge, where you can dine alfresco on top of the building.

Washington County is home to great agritourism stops like Country Kids Pumpkin Patch in Hoyleton and Rainbow Ranch Petting Zoo in Nashville. A piece of unique history can be found in Okawville; the Original Springs Hotel was built in 1867 and is the last natural mineral spa in Illinois. They currently offer a full-service restaurant and spa for visitors.

Perry County has some amazing events in the summer like the American Thresherman Show at the Fairgrounds in Pinckneyville. From steam engine demonstrations to blacksmithing and broom making, it’s a great way to see how folks used to live. Du Quoin is well-known for

the Du Quoin State Fair and the Holiday Lights Fair – both held at the fairgrounds. It’s also home to St. Nicholas Brewing Company, which is another ‘Illinois Made’ business. Outdoor enthusiasts will want to look up Pyramid State Recreation Area in Perry County as well. With more than 19,700 acres – this is the largest state recreation area in Illinois and is home to several ponds and lakes.

Our Eastern Region features twelve counties, each with their own flair. The longest covered bridge in Illinois can be found in Cumberland County, on the outskirts of Greenup. The Cumberland County Bridge is 200 feet long, and sits only a couple of miles away from Cameo Vineyards which is celebrating 30 years of growing grapes and 20 years of winemaking.

Clark County is the land of giants! Casey is home to eleven of the World’s Largest Things including the World’s Largest Rocking Chair and the World’s Largest Mailbox! In the nearby town of Marshall, visitors can find the World’s Largest Gavel at the Clark County Courthouse. Speaking of giants, if you seek out the famous Moonshine Store for their burgers, they serve up half-pound patties, so pack your appetite.

A little-known fact about the community of Robinson in Crawford County is that it’s the birthplace of the Heath candy bar, which is celebrating its 95th anniversary this year! Elsewhere in Crawford County, if rodeos pique your interest – make a trip to Palestine on Labor Day weekend for the Pioneer City Rodeo, which attracts thousands of folks a year.

One of the few remaining drive-in movie theaters in Downstate Illinois can be found in Jasper County. The Drive ‘N Theatre just outside of Newton is celebrating its 70th season this year! Another fact that folks are surprised about is that Jasper County is the birthplace of actor and musician Burl Ives. There is a statue of him near the courthouse where folks can sit and take a picture.

Railroad enthusiasts listen up, Clay County is home to a couple attractions that you’ll want to experience. The Flora Depot was built in 1917 by the B&O Railroad, and it now serves as a museum in Flora. Elsewhere in town, the Little Toot Railroad at Charley Brown Park is a 15” gauge train that children and adults alike love to ride.

Arguably the cutest critters in our region are the white squirrels of Olney, located in Richland County. There are nearly 70 of these albino squirrels that scamper around town, and the community has fully embraced them. There is a White Squirrel Shoppe where folks can get souvenirs, and even the police cars have squirrels on them!

Lawrence County is home to the Lincoln Trail State Memorial, which honors the journey that Abraham Lincoln and his family made on their way to Illinois from Indiana. While you’re in the area head into Lawrenceville and check out Coco’s Café and Wine Bar as well as the Mandarin Spa.

Hi Yo, Silver, Away! Did you know that Brace Beemer, the radio voice of the Lone Ranger for 13 years is from Mt. Carmel? There is an exhibit in the Wabash County Museum dedicated to his career. Another noteworthy stop in Wabash County is Beall Woods State Park, home to one of the few remaining tracts of virgin timber east of the Mississippi River. Go experience trees that are up to 12 stories tall!

One of the coolest landmarks in southeastern Illinois is the pagoda in Albion, right next to the Edwards County Courthouse. If you’re in town, stop in to Colyer Coffee House for a delicious beverage that you can sip on while taking pictures with a handful of murals in town.

Food is the name of the tourism game in Wayne County right now. In Wayne City the Little Red Barn has amazing comfort food, while Sweeties is making waves for their ice cream. In Fairfield, you can visit a couple of different coffee shops, Bold Goat or Fusion, and grab lunch or dinner at Jovalou. If the weather is nice, we recommend dining in the alley at Jovalou – it’s a cool experience.

Hamilton County is well known for the McLeansboro Fall Festival. While there is a parade and a carnival, live music is the name of the game here. There are acts on three different nights, and thanks to sponsorships, visitors don’t have to pay a thing. They’ve hosted everyone from Diamond Rio to Ricky Skaggs!

For camping, cabins, mini-golf, a children’s playground and much more – look up I-64 KOA in Grayville. It’s right off of the interstate in White County, and its western theme is super cool. Elsewhere in White County, you can stay at the Social House Bed & Breakfast in Carmi. This Neo-Classic Revival Inn is nearly 120 years old and features some amazing architecture.

Now that we’ve armed you with a ton of information about our region, hopefully we’ve enticed you to make a visit or eight! If you’d like one of our 2023 Visitors Guides, please head to downstateil.org and click on ‘Visitors Guide’ at the top to request your copy. Also, keep an eye on our website and social channels as we get closer to the 2024 Total Solar Eclipse on April 8th. Many of our communities have plans for the big event, so our region will be ‘eclipse central.’ Surprises Await in Downstate Illinois, and we hope to see you soon!

